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JOMINI'S CRITIQUE OF McCLELLAN'S PENINSULA CAMPAIGN
Core Course 2 Essay

Colonel Orval Nangle, USMC/Class of '96
Foundations of Military Thought and Strategy
Seminar F
Seminar Leaders: Dr. Albert Pierce and
Captain Rosemary Mariner, USN
Faculty Adviser: Colonel Glasgow

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Dear General McClellan:¹

At the request of a mutual friend, I am writing to provide you with my personal military assessment of your recent Peninsula campaign against the Confederate States, particularly with regard to the development and conduct of the Union strategy. I have made an extensive scientific study of warfare to derive those fixed and eternal principles which govern its conduct. Those principles are summed up in The Art of War² and are absolutely indispensable to military success. As a West Point graduate (Class of 1846), you studied my work at the Academy and will recognize the references to it in this letter. The comments which follow are truly offered in the hope that they will be well-received and lead to greater success.

Political and Military Considerations. War may be properly undertaken for a variety of reasons to include reclaiming or defending certain rights as in this case in which the Union seeks to uphold its sovereignty over the Confederate States. Of course, the purpose of the war will influence in some degree the nature and extent of efforts and operations necessary for the proposed end.³ Clearly, the South is in rebellion and has declared itself to be separate and independent. It does not intend an offensive war and cannot be defeated by a defensive strategy. The Union's purpose dictates that it pursue an offensive war aimed at conquest. An invasion which carries the war to

Editor's note: This letter from Antoine Henri Jomini, apparently written shortly after the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, was recently discovered by General McClellan's great grandson. It is reproduced here without change. I have added footnotes to cite those portions of Jomini's work to which he refers and to make comments on the matters presented.

¹Antoine Henri Jomini The Art of War. Trans. G.H. Medell and W.P. Craighill. Philadelphia. J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1862

²Jomini 12

³Jomini 12.

the South is the best means for accomplishing that goal.

The first care of a Commander taking the field should be to agree with the head of the state upon the character of the war.⁵ While you and President Lincoln shared some understanding of the character of war, it was not complete. The war had to be and would be one of invasion, but would it be prudent and cautious or bold and adventurous?⁶ After the Union defeat at the Battle of First Manassas, the President was eager for military progress. For political reasons, he needed military action to maintain Union support, and he needed it soon. The President did not want an overly slow, cautious campaign, and that decision belongs to the realm of statesmanship.⁷ Your failure to heed the President's admonition for speed caused him and others to question your strategic decisions and contributed to his subsequent action to detach a critical part of your command.⁸

In addition to political considerations, there are other significant considerations which do not belong to diplomacy, strategy, or tactics but influence the conduct of war. Military policy embraces all those factors.⁹ They include the opposing nation's passion, military system, immediate means and reserves, financial resources, the abilities of the army commanders, and resources and obstacles of every kind likely to be met which are not included in diplomacy nor

⁵Jomini 59.

See Jomini 12.

⁶Jomini 13.

⁷McClellan wanted to avoid a long, bitter conflict. His goal was reconciliation between the Union and the Confederacy. He therefore would devise a strategy aimed at bringing the war to a quick conclusion with minimal casualties on both sides. In this respect, his approach was indirect, much like that of Li Shao Hsiang or Sun Tzu.

⁹Jomini 54.

strategy. The South is fighting for its independence and has a greater military tradition than the Union. It has raised a large army and has an educated and experienced military leadership. On the other hand, it has comparatively few industrial or financial resources. Its economy is primarily agricultural and dependent upon foreign trade. It cannot challenge the Union's control of the sea and has a much smaller population. There are no fixed rules on such subjects except to obtain knowledge of the details and to take them into consideration in the arrangement of all plans. General Winfield Scott's "Anaconda Plan" rests largely on these factors and, if continued, should contribute to achieving military victory but cannot substitute for offensive action.¹⁰

Development of Strategy. As I have stated, war is conducted according to the great principles of the art; however, great discretion must be exercised in the nature of the operations undertaken as it will depend on the circumstances of the case.¹¹ Aside from the political and military policy considerations mentioned, the art of war consists of five principal parts: strategy, grand tactics, logistics, tactics, and the art of the engineer. Strategy, which is the chief concern of this correspondence, encompasses the entire theater of operations and determines where to act. It is the art of making war on the map and includes selection of the theater of war, the decisive points, the zone of operations, the objective point, the strategic fronts, the lines of operations, bases of operations,

¹⁰Jomini and McClellan would agree that Scott's "Manassas" approach of a naval blockade would not alone compel peace or resolve the conflict.

¹¹Jomini 13

¹²Jomini 59

maneuvers, sieges, entrenched encampments, and diversions ¹³

In reviewing the strategy you developed for the campaign, it must be noted that the general configuration of the theater of war had a great influence upon the direction of lines of operations.¹⁴ As Commander of the Army of the Potomac, Washington was already established as your base of operations. It was the place from which to obtain reinforcements and resources, from which to start your offensive, and to which to retreat when necessary. Your theater of operations could not leave that base unprotected. Mountains occupied the western face of the theater, and the sea occupied the eastern face. The Confederate forces were encamped near Centerville and Manassas to the south blocking your Army's path to Richmond which otherwise was only 90 miles away.

In strategy the choice of objective points will generally depend upon the aim of the war, the character which political or other circumstances give it, and upon the military capabilities of the two parties.¹⁵ While the geographic position of the capital, the political relations of the warring parties with their neighbors, and their respective resources should not be considered in fighting battles, they are intimately connected with plans of operations and may determine whether an army should attempt to seize a hostile capital. The greatest talent of a general, and the surest hope of success, lie in some degree in the choice of objective points.¹⁶ He must determine the relative advantages and disadvantages presented by different

¹³Jomini 61-2

¹⁴See Jomini 71.

¹⁵Jomini 82.

¹⁶France J. Scahy Lessons of War London W.H. Allen & Co., 1870 36-7

¹⁷Jomini 81

operations. Since your aim was offensive and the South had no allies, you chose Richmond as your objective point. Possession of the hostile capital would compel an enemy to make peace.²⁹ Because of the proximity of the capital, you could reasonably expect to reach it without intermediate objectives in only a matter of days.

The one great fundamental principle underlying all the operations of war is to throw the mass of one's forces upon the decisive point.³⁰ Thus, through strategic movements, you may suddenly change the front or cause the enemy to separate his forces allowing you to throw the mass of the army successively upon the decisive points of a theater of war and also upon the communications of the enemy to the fullest extent possible without endangering your own communications. Similarly, one can and should arrange the mass of forces so that they are not only thrown upon the decisive point, but that they engage at the proper time and with energy.³¹ While this principle is simple in concept, it is not simple to apply. Even when one recognizes the decisive point, it is not easy to recognize the decisive moment. Genius and experience are everything and mere theory is of little value in judging the latter.³²

The art of giving proper direction to the mass of forces is the basis for strategy, and in every strategic movement, the question for decision will always be whether to maneuver to the right, to the left, or directly in front.³³ The Union's command of the sea presented an option of choosing a line of operations and zone of operations which

²⁹Jomini 80.

³⁰See Jomini 63

³¹Jomini 63

³²United States Military Academy
Schlieffen West Point, 1967. 13.

Jomini, Clausewitz and

³³Jomini 60

would avoid overland maneuver through Northern Virginia. Ships could transport the army directly from Washington to the Virginia peninsula located between the York and James Rivers. This strategic line would enable the Union to outflank the Confederate army and march up the peninsula on the capital before stiff defenses could be prepared. McDowell's, Bank's, and Fremont's forces would remain near Washington to protect the base of operations and tie down the nearby Confederate army. This would prevent the Confederate army from maneuvering to mass its forces at Richmond, or at least, permit McDowell to attack on their rear and flanks if they did maneuver.

Although operating in the enemy's rear is not always safe due to the dangers to one's own line of communications and lines of operations, your strategy seems well-conceived. Union command of the sea was complete and thus lines of communication, that is the routes between different parts of the army, though deep lines were secure should a line of retreat be necessary. The flanks of the army would be protected by rivers as it proceeded up the peninsula toward the objective. This strategy did, however, give the Confederate army interior lines allowing them to maneuver in a shorter period of time than your forces could along its exterior lines.

In maneuvering to the Peninsula, you seized the initiative. Taking the initiative is almost always an advantage, particularly in strategy. The initiative allows you to mass forces at the decisive point. You knew where that decisive point was and could maneuver to get your forces there at a time when they would be decisive. The Confederates, not having the initiative, could only guess at the decisive point and the decisive moment. Morally and politically, taking the initiative is advantageous as well. It carries the war to

the enemy's land diminishing its resources while conserving yours. It also elevates the morale of your army and generally depresses the enemy

Conduct of the Campaign. The logistics of the maneuver from the sea in April went well, and the landing was unopposed. Once your movement was detected and your aim perceived, the Confederate army under Joseph Johnston began to move to protect Richmond, and Stonewall Jackson's forces initiated a campaign in the Shenandoah Valley to prevent McDowell's army from moving to pursue Johnston and support your attack. President Lincoln, alarmed by Jackson's diversion and fearing for the safety of Washington, prevented McDowell's march toward Richmond by detaching him from your command.²⁴ Despite the soundness of your strategy, and its boldness in strategic concept, the President did not share confidence in it and would not risk sending a large part of Washington's defensive force on the offensive at Richmond. This illustrates the advantage that a sovereign has over a general who is himself not the head of a state. A sovereign is responsible only to himself for his bold enterprises and may dispose of all the public resources for attainment of his end.²⁵ The U.S. government should have chosen its ablest general and then left him free to wage war according to scientific principles.²⁶ Absent that,

²⁴Before McClellan's maneuver, Lincoln had gone so far as to raise the question of McClellan's loyalty to the Union. He specifically directed that sufficient forces be retained in Washington for its defense. Because of Jackson's diversion, Lincoln was not satisfied of Washington's safety without the presence of McDowell's forces. Bruce Catton. The Army of the Potomac: Mr. Lincoln's Army. Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1962. 100, 103.

²⁵Jomini 47

²⁶John Sny "Jomini" Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age Princeton, Princeton UP, 1986. 161. Sun Tzu would agree. See Samuel Griffith. Sun Tzu: The Art of War New York: Oxford UP, 1971. 83

the best a general can do is to convince the sovereign of the purpose and soundness of the strategy to minimize the likelihood of meddling. Your error in this regard lies in failing to reach a complete accord on the conduct of war or in obtaining full authority to conduct it

Once landed, the army immediately set out for Richmond. While regrettable that time was lost because the weather was wet and the roads difficult, your progress was satisfactory until you reached the Confederate entrenchments near Yorktown. The Confederate position there was supported by several dozen heavy naval guns. Instead of bringing up your siege guns, you could have attacked the position or maneuvered to force the enemy to retreat. Even if a siege was necessary due to their fortified position and the threat it posed to your line of operations, a detachment could have maintained the siege while the army continued toward Richmond.²⁷ That it took a month to prepare for the siege is intolerable. The importance of maneuvering to the peninsula was to strike Richmond in the rear of the Confederate army with the mass of your forces. Delaying for such a long period would allow the Confederates to move troops on their interior lines and prepare their defenses so you would no longer be striking their rear. This is just what Johnston was doing during that month. The Fundamental Principle of War requires that the masses be thrown upon the decisive point at the proper time. Your delay at Yorktown allowed that optimum, decisive time to slip away. Once you were fully prepared to attack at Yorktown, the Confederates fell back around Richmond, having gained the time they sought.

You thereafter continued the march to within six miles of Richmond and established positions on the east along your line of operations. After a brief Confederate offensive at Fair Oaks, you

²⁷ Jomini 60

again readied your siege guns, delaying your attack for nearly another month. Given such time, the defense is not without advantages. Attackers must cross any obstacles constructed before reaching the enemy lines. Moreover, when wisely conducted, a defensive war may be active, taking the offense at times to seize weak points in the enemy's lines.³³ Using his interior lines, Lee brought Jackson's army to Richmond and seized the initiative by attacking your right flank. The resulting series of battles (Seven Days Battle) forced you to retreat to your base on the James River. The President would not send McDowell to attack the Confederate rear, nor reinforce you. Ultimately, he recalled the army to Washington, producing a strategic failure.

Conclusions. The greater or less activity and boldness of the commanders of armies are elements of success or failure which cannot be submitted to rules.³⁴ In the final analysis, your strategic plan was well conceived, demonstrating bold strategic qualities. By taking the initiative and maneuvering your force, you were able to get within six miles of the enemy capital without fighting a battle. Your movement up the Peninsula, however, was too slow to reach the decisive point before the Confederates, an initial mistake. Nevertheless, if you had maintained the initiative by starting the siege, you still might have prevailed. Your failure to do so was a second mistake. You anticipated the Confederate movement of forces from Northern Virginia but failed to anticipate political decisions countermanding McDowell's flanking maneuver. That decision grew from your failure to appreciate his concern for the safety of Washington and to fully persuade the President of the merits of your strategy. You bear the

- Jcm:nl 66-7.

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responsibility for the first two errors and share responsibility for the last. Ironically, had you done what the President wanted by moving swiftly or had he done what you wanted by sending McDowell, the results would have been more favorable. Each acted to frustrate the other.

All great men learn from their mistakes. Adherence to the scientific principles of war will produce generals of sufficient skill to rank only after those natural masters of the art of war.⁶

Your humble servant,

Antoine Henri Jomini